

Daily Herald, April 5, 2008

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk on Friday blasted Illinois lawmakers for jeopardizing about \$4 billion in federal transportation funding by failing to approve a capital projects program for the state.

Money that's been set aside for Illinois bus and rail improvements likely will go to other states if the General Assembly doesn't act, Kirk said.

"I am stunned at the lack of leadership on this issue," the Highland Park Republican said during a GLMV Chamber of Commerce lunch at the Crowne Plaza hotel in Mundelein. "There should be no federal dollar left behind."

The money is part of an approximately \$7 billion package of CTA, Metra and Pace projects included in the federal transportation package approved in 2005.

Through the efforts of then-House Speaker Dennis Hastert, Kirk and other lawmakers, Illinois stood to receive money for more start-up projects than any other state, Kirk said.

The legislation requires state lawmakers to provide matching funds for the projects, however. So far, Illinois lawmakers haven't pledged enough to qualify for all the aid, Kirk said.

The state has proffered only \$1 billion to collect about \$2.7 billion in funds. An additional \$1.8 billion in state funding is needed to receive about \$4.2 billion from the U.S. government.

"We are going to fall quite short," Kirk said.

Kirk said he's teamed with U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, Illinois' senior senator, to repeatedly plead with lawmakers to approve the necessary matching funds, but there's been no movement.

He singled out Gov. Rod Blagojevich for criticism and called the lack of action "incompetence."

Kirk fears the inaction will lead federal transportation officials to reallocate the money to Florida, Pennsylvania, New York and other states with current projects in need of dollars.

Kirk also spoke to the crowd about the nation's mortgage crisis, his quest to get federal funding to clean up Waukegan Harbor, the Great Lakes and other issues.

He followed his comments by fielding questions on topics including border security, the war against terrorism and rising gasoline costs."